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 Date 24 April 1991 ^{AP}

Vernon Walters, One of Last Cold Warriors, Marks 50 Years of Service

An AP Extra

By TERRENCE PETTY

Associated Press Writer

BONN, Germany (AP) - A ragged shard of glass is one of Vernon Walters' most treasured possessions.

It is a relic from another time, another posting: 34 years ago when a leftist mob in Venezuela hurled rocks at him and Richard Nixon, shattering their car windows and injuring Walters.

One of the last Cold Warriors still in office, the lantern-jawed veteran troubleshooter is marking his 50th year of government service.

Now the U.S. ambassador to Germany, Walters has served seven presidents, conducted secret missions, witnessed military coups and earned the scorn of leftists in foreign lands for his unabashed anti-Communism.

Asked in an interview what has kept him going, the 74-year-old diplomat replied: "My perception that the United States was the only real chance freedom had to survive in the world."

Walters has a reputation for outspokenness.

A few months after arriving in Bonn in 1989, Walters raised eyebrows in Washington by predicting German unity would occur soon, even though the U.S. administration had been making cautious public statements about unification.

Walters is still making forecasts.

"I think there will be a form of political union" of Europe, he said. "I think it will occur in the broad sense."

But Walters said he can't imagine France and some other countries "giving up the real elements of sovereignty. I think the sense of national entity will remain for quite a long time."

With his portliness and powerful personality, Walters is an imposing presence.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who is also overweight, joked at a photo sitting with Walters that he didn't feel so fat when posing with the U.S. ambassador.

Walters sometimes dismays his security detail by announcing he's going to take a journey in his private car.

Last summer, he piloted his 13-year-old American sedan without security across Germany, Poland and into the Soviet Union, astonishing border guards.

Walters appears occasionally on German television, most recently during the Persian Gulf War when he defended the U.S. decision to attack the Iraqis and complained about anti-war protesters camped outside his embassy.

Walters' task at the time was to shore up German support for the U.S.-led fighting.

I think the Germans were, largely as a result of our earlier

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indoctrination, convinced the use of force was wrong," Walters told The Associated Press in the interview Monday, alluding to the pacifism the United States encouraged among the Germans after their World War II defeat.

A master of several languages, Walters has often been called on by U.S. leaders to serve as aide and translator.

Walters says one of his most memorable moments was a 1957 tour with then-Vice President Richard Nixon to South America.

While driving past anti-U.S. protesters in Caracas, Venezuela, Nixon's car was attacked by a shower of stones. One of the projectiles smashed Walters' window, spraying him with glass and cutting him in the mouth.

According to Walters, Nixon told him at that point, "Spit that glass out -you are going to have a lot more talking to do in Spanish for me today."

"He showed extraordinary courage and understanding," said Walters, who believes history will prove Nixon's detractors have badly misjudged the man.

Walters also witnessed upheaval in Brazil, where he was U.S. defense attache from 1962 to 1967.

Shortly after Walters arrived in Rio de Janeiro, the Communist daily newspaper Novos Rumos alleged he was the Pentagon's "chief specialist in military coups" and that he was there to help topple Joao Goulart, Brazil's leftist president.

Goulart was deposed in a 1964 military insurrection. Washington and Walters have denied they had anything to do with it.

Walters has had other memorable moments as well.

While U.S. defense attache in France in 1970, Walters borrowed the private plane of then-French President Georges Pompidou to sneak Henry Kissinger into Paris for talks with the North Vietnamese about the Indochina war.

To keep the mission secret, Walters concocted a story about the landing of the French president's plane in Frankfurt involving a woman. Walters told Pompidou's wife the truth.

Walters joined the Army as a private in 1941. Within a year he was a lieutenant, and later dodged enemy fire as aide-de-camp to Gen. Mark Clark, commander of the U.S. Fifth Army.

Walters rose to the rank of lieutenant general.

He also served at NATO headquarters, was deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency and U.S. representative at the United Nations.

Between 1981 and 1985, Walters was roving U.S. ambassador for special missions, undertaking tasks so sensitive he still refuses to discuss some of them.

One of his greatest pleasures, says Walters, was watching the Berlin Wall come crashing down, and with it the end of the Cold War.

Said the diplomat:

"When I saw on the 10th of November (1989) the East German police helping demonstrators up onto the Berlin Wall, I understood we had won the long conflict that had lasted nearly all my adult life."